

A detailed botanical illustration of a plant with several upright stems. The stems are green and have small, narrow leaves. The flowers are blue and have a daisy-like appearance with many small petals. Some flowers are fully open, while others are in bud. The illustration is set against a light yellow background.

An excerpt from
BOTANY READINGS

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Why Study Botany?

I met her about a year ago at a cocktail party. It started as one of those awkward moments where two strangers touch hands while dipping their corn chips in the guacamole. Our initial eye contact was brief (her eyes were violet), her saffron hair cascaded over her shoulders, and the timbre of her voice was more delicate than falling leaves in autumn: "Have we ever met?"

I managed a weak mumble because I had just filled my mouth with a corn chip coated with guacamole, but I sensed I had her interest. I must have, because she outright asked: "What do you do?"

By this time the corn chip and guacamole had sufficiently cleared my esophagus for me to proudly proclaim: "I'm a botanist!"

"Ugh! Why would anyone ever want to study plants?"

I was sure that I could hold her interest and that there wouldn't be one of those endless moments of silence in the conversation. After years of trying to explain why we study plants to students in botany courses, I had my answer prepared. The only problem was time: I could spend years answering her question. I did not take years to answer her question, and it should not take you years to read the rest of this brief article. This article, like my cocktail party answer, has to possess brevity because of the situation.

"How could anyone who just took a bite of a thick sauce of mashed avocado, tomatoes, onion, hot peppers, and lemon juice on a fried chip of corn flour, and is washing it down with some fermented grape juice, ask such a question?" I noticed a dab of avocado green on her strawberry lips and continued. "Not only that, you now are using a paper napkin to wipe up the guacamole spilled onto the linen tablecloth that is protecting a mahogany table. By the way, there's some dip on your lip."

Her cheeks flushed cherry red, but her glare softened. I sensed that we were headed for a memorable, stimulating, intellectual discussion. I took a sip of my root beer, then reached for the mixed nuts. Since there was no more guacamole she turned to the relish tray for some broccoli, carrots, cauliflower, mushrooms, and radishes; she dipped them in green goddess, a mixture of mayonnaise and chopped spinach. I was caught off guard with: "It's stuffy in here; someone must have put too many logs on the fire. Besides, I'm getting a headache because there are too many smokers in here. Would you happen to have an aspirin?"

I glanced over my shoulder to see a jerk flick cigar ashes into the philodendron's soil. The yellowish color of the leaves suggested that the ash probably would not do too much harm. I made a mental note to look up the yellowish-leaf symptoms on a plant pathology web site when I returned to my office on Monday. I found my emergency supply of aspirin in the left-front pocket of my jacket and tried to control the excitement in my voice: "Would you like to go for a walk outside?"

She washed down the aspirin with a lemon-lime soda and replied: "If we go through the garden there is a path that leads to the stream at the edge of the woods."

As she turned toward the oak French doors I caught the fresh scent of her jasmine perfume. We stepped onto the redwood deck and a light breeze gently caressed her one hundred percent cotton dress, and blew my silk tie over my shoulder.

You are probably wondering why I was wearing a silk tie. The answer is that even animal products that we use can be linked to plants. The example easily could have been a wool tie since sheep eat grass. But I thought I would challenge you a little with silkworms—they eat mulberry leaves.

So why would anyone want to study plants? The answer for me is simple: It's fun! Some people, however, require more serious justification for pursuing botany as either an academic subject or as a hobby. The serious justification for studying plants is straightforward: Plants are essential for the survival of humans! This is true today, it has been true since humans began existing on Earth, and it will be true for as long as there are humans.

The most obvious uses of plants are food, clothing, and construction materials. Other very important uses include fuel, paper, industrial chemicals, essential oils, pleasure, and medicines. Often the role of plants in your well-being may not be as obvious as the examples cited in the above story. The example with the silkworms is to bring out this point: Even though we do not directly use some plants, they still have a role in our lives. Make a list of everything that has been used to support you for the past day, weeks, and year, and you should have an impressive list of how plants have been an integral part of your life.